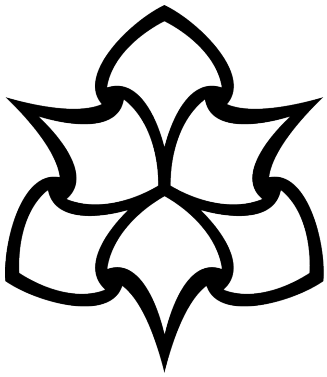

Needlework and John Ruskin's "acicular art of nations"

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About the author

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Abstract

This essay outlines Victorian cultural critic John Ruskin's use of needlework. Paying particular attention to textiles in the opening and closing of *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1885), and highlighting educational texts by two women cited there (Kate Stanley and Millicent Garrett Fawcett), this paper argues that Ruskin blurs the boundaries of Victorian Britain's hierarchical classifications of gender, class, nation and art. Mapping a shift in Ruskin's knowledge and use of needlework, particularly as negotiated through learning about plain sewing and embroidery from Stanley, it demonstrates how Ruskin takes a traditionally feminine form of work and uses it to teach universal lessons.

Key Words

John Ruskin, needlework, education, political economy, Kate Stanley, Millicent Garrett Fawcett

In 1883, Kate Stanley published *Needlework and Cutting-Out; Being Hints, Suggestions, and Notes for the Use of Teachers in Dealing with the Difficulties in the Needlework Schedule*. The manual's dedication reads:

> To Professor Ruskin, LL.D., who writes, "*While the plough of the husbandman goes well in the field, and the plough (needle) of the woman goes well at home, the nation will be happy,*" by kind permission, this little book is affectionately and respectfully dedicated, by the author. (vii)

Stanley, her "little book" and its dedication shed light on how eminent Victorian critic John Ruskin perceived of needlework and how, in dialogue with Stanley and other women, his appreciation for it grew.

The quotation Stanley offers links national happiness with the products of labour; the needle is the synecdochic representation of feminine labour, and the image of a productive society is based on binary gender roles. A year later, in *Fors Clavigera* Letter 94, Ruskin responded to a question from "tutress in a school for young girls" who was pondering the practicalities of the needlework curriculum (29.490).[1] Ruskin's answer was to direct her and all his readers to Stanley's book. This brief passage is part of a wider discussion of education in that letter, picking up a major trope of *Fors*: that proper education and labour are requisites for a happy nation. Throughout, Ruskin seems to reinforce clearly demarcated gender roles, epitomised by men using ploughs in the fields and women using needles in the home. He also appears to conform to English imperialism by privileging Britishness. These aspects of Ruskin – problematic from a 21st century perspective – are there. But, as Ruskin's ideas highlighted by Stanley's dedication (education, gender, economics, nationhood and what makes a happy society) coalesce, they blur hierarchical divisions. Needlework, subtly present in *Fors* from beginning to end, plays an important role as he articulates these nuanced complexities.

This paper follows Ruskin's use of needlework in the first two letters of *Fors*, where he utilises cloth and its products to teach lessons in political economy, then picks up the thread in the antepenultimate and penultimate numbers of the 96 letters, where he reflects on an ideal educational curriculum culminating with "lastly of needlework […] the acicular art of nations" (29.509). In doing so, it highlights his use of books written by two British women in order to teach his readership: well-known suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett and little-

[1] Unless otherwise stated, references to Ruskin's writing are from *The Works of John Ruskin, The "Library Edition*." Subsequent references to specific *Fors Clavigera* will by listed as *Fors* no.

known needlework teacher Kate Stanley. By considering the first two letters in the *Fors* series and the last two but one, this paper maps a shift in Ruskin's perception of needlework and his growing recognition that it is a universal form of creative culture.

1. Fors Clavigera: Lessons in *"Savoir Vivre"*

Conceived as a vehicle to communicate his vision for a better society, *Fors Clavigera* is a series of public letters. Written between 1871 and 1884, "Ruskin did not intend at the outset that *Fors* should span 96 letters and 14 years" (Atwood 125). The subtitle declares these to be "*Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*," and he began them while Slade Professor of Art at Oxford, envisaging *Fors* as "a new platform, additional to that available to him at Oxford" whereby he could "be useful beyond an audience of the upper classes, and to teach others what he phrased […] the necessary science of 'savoir vivre' (XXVII.85)" (O'Gorman *Late* 82). This French concept of "*savoir vivre*" – the learned knowledge of customs and appropriate behaviour in a society, of how to live well together – captures what Ruskin was trying to achieve. It also resonates with his use of cloth (its structures, embellishments and useful products) as a metaphor for humans living together.

The intended audience was multi-layered: initially, primarily a British male labourer, but also more broadly anyone interested in "abat[ing] this misery" of economic and cultural poverty (26.13). The intended reader became existing and potential Companions of the Guild of St George, the charity he established simultaneously in 1871 to connect like-minded people into a network labouring "for the good and help of all" (28.645). *Fors* was a 19th century version of a blog dedicated to a broad topic by a public figure. The notion of a Victorian blog helps illustrate the fractured, interwoven, immediate, sometimes polemic and often personal nature of *Fors*, as well as the shifting implied reader. It helps to explain some of the apparent contradictions. Ruskin famously declared "I am never satisfied that I have handled a subject properly till I have contradicted myself at least three times" (16.187); this changeableness is arguably most evident in *Fors*.

As it opens in January 1871, *Fors* seems a world away from needlework. The first paragraph of the first letter reflects on "the direct calamities which have fallen on neighbouring states […] in a great national quarrel:" the Franco-Prussian War (27.11). He expands his focus, listing national groups causing the British "much bodily fear" following or in light of anticipated conflicts, and includes most of the known world: "Russians," "Prussians," "Americans," "Hindoos" [Indians], "Chinese," "Japanese," "New Zealanders" [Maori] and

"Caffres" [Africans]. He points out "our only real desire respecting any of these nations has been to get as much out of them as we could" (27.12). Ruskin the political-economist, whose writings would inspire "figures as diverse as Tolstoy, Gandhi, and many of the key civil servants and politicians responsible in the 1940s for the re-construction of Great Britain," is evident (Eagles 261). Elsewhere, as Edward Said points out, he encourages British colonial power: "England's […] art and culture depend, in Ruskin's view, on an enforced imperialism" (104). Here, he decries its exploitative expansion. Simply put, he "critique[s …] England as the centre of an imperial power he believed had been corrupted by greed and pride" (Tate 170). His main point of reference remains Britain as his intended audience is British; it does not necessarily follow that he therefore deems Britain intrinsically superior – as discussed later in relation to *Fors* 95, Ruskin uses country-specific products of the needle to argue the British should learn from superior work of other nations.

Up to this point, seven paragraphs into the first letter, he has addressed the macro-level of nations. Having uttered his opposition to insular, colonial approaches to international relations, which – paradoxically, with non-interventionist insularity avoiding, and imperial-expansionism encompassing, the external – have cultivated poverty, misery and loss of beauty for the majority, Ruskin argues for a universal approach to neighbourly living premised on how individuals interact at the domestic level. He believes common good shall come if "[t]he first object of all work […] is to get food, clothes, lodging and fuel" for all (27.19). Laying out initial ideas for improving the macro-level of the public sphere, a thread linking all 96 letters of *Fors Clavigera* and his wider works, he focuses on the needs of the individual, domestic human. The domestic/feminine offers the solution to the public/masculine. As he lists requirements we all share, products of the needle rank second behind food in a taxonomy of human need.

He offers a similar list in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865): "sure good is, first in feeding people, then in dressing people, then in lodging people, and lastly in rightly pleasing people, with arts, or sciences, or any other subject of thought" (18.182). Here, "fuel" is replaced by intellectual and aesthetic stimulation – education. Discussing male and female education separately, he is not consciously binary nor offering the male as superior. Rather, he meets his readers where they are, reflecting educational divisions of his time:

> You may see continually girls who have never been taught to do a single useful thing thoroughly; who cannot sew, who cannot cook, who cannot cast an account, nor prepare a medicine, whose whole life has been passed either in play or in pride.

> […] Give such a girl any true work that will make her active in the dawn, and weary at night, with the consciousness that her fellow-creatures have indeed been the better for her day, and the powerless sorrow of her enthusiasm will transform itself into a majesty of radiant and beneficent peace.
>
> So with our youths [boys]. We once taught them to make Latin verses, and called them educated; now we teach them to leap and to row, to hit a ball with a bat, and call them educated. Can they plough, can they sow, can they plant at the right time, or build with a steady hand? […T]he strength of England is in them, and the hope; but we have to turn their courage from the toil of war to the toil of mercy […]. (18.186)

Emphasising "true work" of "peace" and turning from "the toil of war to the toil of mercy," this resonates with Stanley's use of Ruskin in her dedication, as well as the Biblical reference beneath: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks" (Isa. 2:4). The emphasis on "useful," active education, whether masculine or feminine, giving rise to "hope," "mercy," charity and "peace," thereby eliminating conflict for nations and individuals alike, echoes *Fors* 1, which opens by declaiming divisions and conflict.

In *Fors* 1, as Ruskin considers the nuances of basic human needs within class structures, wherein the rich have excess and the poor not enough, he maintains similar gender divisions:

> It is quite possible to have too much of these things. I know a great many gentlemen, who eat too large dinners; a great many ladies, who have too many clothes. I know there is lodging to spare in London [… and] fuel to spare everywhere, since we get up steam to pound the roads with […]. (27.19)

He aligns gluttony of food with masculine and vanity of clothing with feminine, then – via education in art and science – offers a lesson in political economy, foregrounding dressmaking to develop his point: finite wealth. He concludes that, when "profits depend on patronage," whether in making or buying art or dresses, "it merely means that you have effected a diversion of the current of money in your own favour, and to somebody else's loss. Nothing, really, has been gained by the nation" (27.20-21). There is a multitude of products Ruskin might have used to teach his lesson in political economy – which spans from individual to national, and in the following paragraph, international as his gaze extends to France and Germany. He uses women's labour (dressmakers) and clothing (dresses). Sewing and purchasing dresses illustrate issues of national economic and ethical wealth.

This is not the only place Ruskin uses dresses in this way. For example, his 1858 "Cambridge Inaugural," offered "clothing as a specific product to prove his point"; there, "he overtly integrates male and female, rich and poor, English and French, thus reinforcing its universality" (Dickinson "Teach" 52; see 16.183-85). He similarly discussed "themes of commerce, of individual nations and their particular skills" to convey wider economic, aesthetic, ethical principles (Dickinson "Teach" 53). In *Fors* 1, he progresses from dressmaking to embroidery, through art and food, to military weapons – from the domestic, to the public to the international:

> It may be more dignified for working women to paint than to embroider; and it may be a very charming piece of self-denial, in a young lady, to order a high art fresco instead of a ball-dress; but as far as cakes and ale are concerned, it is all the same, – there is but so much money to be got by you, or spent by her [. …] Whereas, of most things which the English, French, and Germans are paid for making nowadays, – cartridges, cannon, and the like, – you know the best thing we can possibly hope is that they *may* be useless, and the net result of them, zero. (27.21)

There are multiple strands to highlight. Ruskin acknowledges fine art is deemed a higher, "more dignified" means of earning an income than "to embroider." He was well aware that few women painted professionally, while many earned an income through embroidery and plain sewing, and many more laboured in the mechanized factories he deplored. Although this paper is concerned with Ruskin and needlework, he made his name as an art critic and was progressive – if paternalistic – in supporting women who wanted to paint and work as artists, offering advice and lending his voice as a respected connoisseur in support of their skill. He also supported needlewomen by purchasing their work. For example, a private letter written a year later describes decorating his rooms at Corpus Christi College, Oxford: "I've bought an embroidered tablecloth – Green, with black edge – all over flowers, which I am very proud of" (Ruskin, *Sense* L97, p. 145). He thus made his own purchases of embroidery, judging aesthetic merit and fit for his private space. He was aware of the economic exchange: "I've bought." In *Fors* 1, he similarly notes the economic in relation to embroidery, art and sewing, while also highlighting class and gender: the poorer woman works with her hands to earn an income; the wealthier woman ("young lady," "she") spends money earned by the implied male reader ("got by you," "spent by her") on luxury items made by hand ("high art," "ball-

dress"). Then, he returns to where the letter began with another allusion to the Franco-Prussian War, the wastefulness of weaponry, and a concern with the good (the "mercy" and "peace" of *Sesame and Lilies*, above) of nations.

A similar pattern in relation to needlework, economics, gender and nation is repeated in *Fors* 2, dated 1st February 1871. Rather than rehearsing the flow of that argument at length, it suffices to highlight a few elements linking *Fors* 1, 94 and 95. Like *Fors* 1, economics dominate, with comments such as "'wages,' practically, is the quantity of food which the possessor of the land gives you, to work for him. There is, finally, no 'capital' but that" and "all wages mean the food and lodging given you by the possessors of the land" as he explains basic economics to his implied reader: here, a working man (27.23, 27.29-30). Always intrigued by words, Ruskin considers the interplay of "wages" and "Rent." Of the latter, he uses rent both as the common English meaning, that is, money paid to an owner for use of land and housing, but also the French *rente*, which translates as interest or revenue from a loan. Both are economic uses of the term.

In *Fors* 94, Ruskin picks up on "rent" again. Speaking of needlework, he comments that women in his household were,

> but yesterday in much wholesome and sweet excitement […] in the practice of some new device of remedy for Rents (to think how much of evil there is in the two senses of that four-lettered word! as in the two methods of intonation of its synonym, Tear!), whereby it might be daintily effaced, and with a newness which would never make it worse. The process began – beautiful even to my uninformed eyes – in the likeness of herring-bone masonry, crimson on white, but it seemed to me marvellous that anything should yet be discoverable in needle process, and that of so utilitarian character. (29.510-11)

Focusing on "Rents," meaning a textile tear, he also alludes to the economic meaning. Both evoke destruction and division, just as "tear" can mean both bodily representation of sorrow and ragged cut. Ruskin is delighted by the "utilitarian" (it heals the rent in the fabric) and "beautiful" needlework solution. It creates layers of association for him, from visual similarity to "herringbone masonry, crimson on white" (Ruskin prized polychromatic brickwork) to ability to symbolize and embody moral and economic healing. He also indicates surprise that new needlework techniques could still be evolving, implicitly because it is such an ancient craft. This is an issue he considers further in *Fors* 95.

Ruskin offers similarly practical craft examples in *Fors* 1 and 2, but rather than his own life, he turns to a book to illustrate his argument, "the *Manual of Political Economy*, published this year at Cambridge" (27.24). The editors of the *Library Edition* identify this as *Political Economy for Beginners* (1870) by Millicent Garrett Fawcett (24.27n). That Ruskin uses the distilled versions published by Fawcett as his source is important for this argument in relation to Ruskin, gender, education, economics and needlework: he could have used other economic texts – including the male-authored originals summarized by Fawcett – but he chose Fawcett, a female intellectual.

She was also a needlewoman, and her views on women and needlework in the 19th Century are among those cited in Rozsika Parker's influential *The Subversive Stitch*: "Fawcett observed [in 1865] that embroidery was a means of appearing to fulfill the vocation of femininity" (150). She became a leader among suffragists, who used embroidered banners as a subversive means of communication in non-violent protest – a message captured in Gillian Wearing's statue placed at Parliament Square, London, in April 2018: Fawcett's bronze image holds what is clearly an appliqued/embroidered banner.[2] While Ruskin could not have known the important role Fawcett would play in relation to women's equality, nor that hand-stitched banners would be equated to suffragist endeavours, it is telling that he was sufficiently progressive to value her skill as a scholar-educator to cite her illustrations from crafts in making his own argument.

Turning to Fawcett first in *Fors* 1, he offers carpentry; in *Fors* 2, the illustration comes from making cloth and lace. The former is abridged from Bastiat's *Capital et Rente* (1849), the latter is from John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* (1848). Just as his willingness to use a female author is pertinent, so is his awareness that the first example is from a French text. Combined, these help demonstrate that Ruskin is bridging nations and genders, believing they should learn from each other. This is a key message in *Fors* 95 when he discusses needlework. The textile example from Mill via Fawcett in *Fors* 2 features male cloth-maker, lace-maker and employees; Ruskin moves from this to individual women's labour in producing lace. He does not specify whether it is bobbin-lace or needle-lace, simply draws attention to poor women who craft and wealthier women who purchase lace,

> mak[ing] presents of collars and cuffs to each other, for the sake of charity […] if they did not, the poor girl lace-makers would probably indeed be "diverted" into

[2] The image on the Wikipedia page dedicated to the statue illustrates this well. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Millicent_Fawcett

> some other less diverting industry, in due assertion of the rights of women (cartridge-filling, or percussion-cap making, most likely). (27.34)

He describes a "friend" and her circle buying hand-made needlework as acts of charity, thereby enacting his instructions from the 1871 preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, where he directs readers to make textile items for the needy, or to pay "some of the poor women about you" to make them (18.40). With mention of making weapons, he also echoes the opening of *Fors* 1, where he similarly decries the promulgation of war. While he does jab at the women's rights movement, his point is that such equality (to work in munitions factories) would be to take on the worst aspects of the masculine sphere and diminish – not raise – the humanity of these women.

He moves from textile lace via munitions to the evocation of lace in metalwork:

> But there *is* one kind of lace for which I should be glad that the demand ceased. Iron lace. If we must even doubt whether ornamental thread-work may be, wisely, made on cushions in the sunshine, by dexterous fingers for fair shoulders, – how are we to think of Ornamental Ironwork, made with deadly sweat of men, and steady waste, all summer through, of the coals that Earth gave us for winter fuel? What shall we say of labour spent on lace such as that? (27.34)

He despises "iron lace" as being inauthentic recreation in metal of the fluidity of textile lace. Purely decorative, it is anathema to the architectural "principal of drapery" he developed in *Modern Painters I*, which "radically transformed the nature of the ideal ornament, ruling out attached architectural ornamentation altogether" (Chatterjee 36). It also wastes precious fuel: "coals" and human labour. In *Fors* 95, he again makes a connection between iron and thread, but his argument has moved on and, as we shall see, further blurs male/female, iron/thread.

When he begins to consider needlework education in *Fors* 95, it is in the context of plans to build a museum at Sheffield.[3] Designed to provide the local working-class free access to aesthetic models, he believed that such self-directed education, albeit guided by items selected by Ruskin for inclusion in the museum, would improve individuals and nation. Similarly, *Fors* 94 culminates by discussing education, but aimed at children in schools rather than labourers in museums. Here, as noted above, he directs readers to Stanley's *Needlework and*

[3] This museum has been reconstructed on-line by Marcus Waithe.

Cutting-out. Just as Ruskin's use of Garrett's introduction to political economy is pertinent, so is his use of Stanley's introduction to teaching needlework.

2. Kate Stanley, needlework and education: "such a good piece of ploughing"

Kate Stanley was Head Governess and needlework teacher at Whitelands College, founded in 1841, one of many residential teacher-training institutions opened in England about that time (Peacock 14). Starting as a student, she returned as a teacher in 1862, becoming Head Governess in 1876 (Boyce). Ruskin became aware of the school the following year, 1877, when the Principal, Reverend John Pincher Faunthorpe, inspired by reading *Fors*, wrote to Ruskin (Cole 12). A genuine interest began from 1881, after Faunthorpe quoted Ruskin in *Household Science: Readings in Necessary Knowledge for Girls and Young Women* (Hilton 441). A patronage relationship developed between Ruskin, Faunthorpe and the Whitelands community. This was embodied in the Whitelands May Queen Festival, established at Ruskin's suggestion in 1881 to celebrate idealised, charitable femininity. While relevant to a discussion of needlework, not least as from 1893 until 1902 Stanley designed and oversaw the making of the May Queen dresses, the festival is not primary here (Peacock 234). Rather, the focus is on Stanley's teaching of needlework and what Ruskin does with this.

Stanley was a key figure in Ruskin's relationship with the school. A series of letters from Ruskin to Faunthorpe and Stanley from 1877 to 1883 in the Mikimoto Collection, Tokyo, traces the development of their relationship and, through it, Ruskin's growing knowledge of needlework. It is worth noting that – from Faunthorpe's book with its subtitle "*knowledge for girls and young women*," through the May Queen Festival's celebration of idealised femininity, to the very nature of Whitelands as a college training young women to become teachers – Ruskin's interaction with Whitelands was inflected by gender issues and an overt awareness of separate spheres. Yet, as this paper argues, that gendered division (that "rent" in the textile sense) is stitched together, so to speak, by the way needlework is conceived of within (inter-)national contexts, whereby Ruskin reframes it as a key element of culture and education, crossing boundaries of gender, class and nation.

Ruskin's letters to Stanley demonstrate awareness of her stitching prowess long before she dedicated her book to him. In the first letter of this sequence, 2nd October 1877, Ruskin writes to Faunthorpe, but seems to be responding to an offer from Stanley to sew him something: "My waistcoats are the things most useful to me – needing four pockets, and I believe these are more or less constructible by hand" (*Mikimoto* L16, p. 64). A subsequent letter specifies

"that the four pockets must be nice and deep, and the buttonholes easy" (*Mikimoto* L18, p. 69). He is concerned with the practicality of the garment, to be made "by hand." He intended to wear the waistcoat while hill-walking near his home in the Lake District; the deep pockets would be useful to hold small items he might find, such as rocks, while the plea for "easy" buttonholes speaks of frustration with other garments. Ruskin understood that a custom-fit pattern can be modelled on a favourite piece of clothing, for he states: "I shall send one [of his waistcoats] to Miss Stanley" (*Mikimoto* L16, p. 65). He adds "I've no objection to a little zigzagger, or other aculine ornamentation on them, – which I shall proudly manifest to beholders when the wind isn't too cold on the hills" (*Mikimoto* L16, p. 65). While stressing the practical warmth to keep out the "cold" "wind," Ruskin asks for his waistcoat to be embroidered. Zigzag is a common embroidery stitch, most simply executed by working a series of backstitches each at 90 degrees from its neighbour (or in the case of the "remedy for Rents" discussed above, formed by slightly crossing and overlapping the zigzags as a herringbone stitch). For Ruskin, the term normally refers to decorative lines on buildings or lines in drawing. The word "aculine" is less clear; it is not in the *OED*. It might be a miss-spelling of "aquiline" meaning "eagle-like," so evoke the eagle's curved-yet-pointed beak and thus echo the points of a zigzag, or it could be a miss-construction of "acicular," meaning needle-like in scientific terminology, although Ruskin spells this correctly elsewhere. Just as likely given Ruskin's penchant for word-play, it could be a combination. In any event, Ruskin wanted his waistcoat to consist of plain as well as decorative needlework and he anticipated "proudly" showing the embroidery to others.

When it arrived, just before Christmas, he thanked Stanley:

> The waistcoat is just what my faith in you expected, entirely right and nice – the wave pattern exactly right in proportion and not too conspicuous. I wish I knew something of needlework, so as to be able to praise the virtues of this rightly. it seems all very beautifully ~~even~~ straight in the putting together. but I don't quite understand why ever on wrong sides, there should be anything looking disorganized in stitching: it seems [to] me that stitches on the wrong side of the collar for instance struggle about a little like birds['] footprints when one has been feeding them on the snow. My theory of perfect needlework is that the wrong side, though embroidered[,] should be as orderly as the other – please tell me about this.' (*Mikimoto* L23, pp. 83, 85)

Ruskin's focus is not the fit, nor the fabric. He is interested in its stitches and, by extension, his interest in all needlework is piqued: "I wish I knew something of needlework, so as to be able to praise the virtues." Such curiosity is typical of Ruskin in relation to crafts more widely. As Marcus Waithe succinctly puts it, "Ruskin insisted on a manual discipline, and he made a conscious effort to become acquainted with the challenges of specific crafts and their materials" (*Craftsmanship* 10). It is also worth noting that he had a preconceived "theory of perfect needlework:" the hidden reverse should be as neat and beautiful as the front. This is a principal he had long since arrived at in relation to other skilled work, such as architecture. Retrospectively, in an 1889 letter to another Whitelands governess, Ruskin notes that he does not quite approve of Stanley's approach to embroidery:

> My arrears of thanks to Miss Stanley are irredeemable, – but to her I have no counsel to lend, she is always right – not quite in embroidery – but I've given up thinking of that now that I can't see whether a needle has an eye. (cited by Peacock 215n114)

This is likely because she never conformed to his ideal that embroidery should be equally neat and beautiful on both sides.

He turned to Stanley for deeper instruction ("tell me about this"), and his appreciation and knowledge of sewing and embroidery grew. Two and a half years later, on 31st March 1880, he wrote about a medieval manuscript he sent to Whitelands, adding:

> From what you showed me of needlework, I think you may perhaps realize a long-lost dream of mine – of seeing the letter I, of this book changed into embroideries for hems of pretty robes ~~of~~ for pious damsels – with this one proviso that the dragons shall be sufficiently understood as in subjection by their position – without actually being <u>trodden on</u> – whether in walk or in dance. (*Mikimoto* L 27, pp. 101, 103).

A month later, he promised another medieval text "because there's a piece of illumination in it, which may serve as a standard of the possible in modern [needle] work" (*Mikimoto* L28, p. 109). In both cases, he fuses art/craft, word/stitch, conceiving a fluid transfer between different forms of skilled work. The idea of stylized dragon "embroideries for hems of pretty robes" is in keeping with ideals of the aesthetic dress movement, which he supported, and echoes his guidance in the preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, that women make clothing and

"embroider it or otherwise beautify it moderately with fine needlework" (18.40). A dragon "in subjection" as subject matter brings the full weight of symbolic allusion he associated with St George, whose fight against the dragon came to represent Ruskin's own fight against "Illth" and corruption wrought by industrialisation and unchecked capitalism.[4]

So, by the time she planned her needlework book, compiling "a series of papers [written] for the *Schoolmistress*," Stanley had an established relationship with Ruskin and had been instructing him in the techniques and possibilities of needlework (Stanley *Needlework* ix). While her manual largely deals with plain sewing and darning, rather than decorative embroidery, it foregrounds skills to make even stitches by hand. Ruskin himself largely conflates the various forms of needlework.

On 15th December 1882, Ruskin responded to Stanley's request to dedicate the book to him:

> I shall be quite delighted by your dedication of your book to me, – and the letter form of inscription is perfect. I should have answered before, but in this perpetual darkness, I simply cant read my letters – and only feel my way over the paper in answering them – How you can get a needle threaded is inconceivable to me. (*Mikimoto* L44, p. 155)

Through the "letter form of inscription" ("To Professor Ruskin"), her book becomes an extension of lessons in needlework she had been giving him. He draws a parallel between his pen with its implied nib and her needle, both "ploughs." This link is more overt six months later, on 28th June 1883, when he wrote to thank her:

> "I am <u>so</u> proud of my book. – I never saw one more delightful of its kind or wholly after my own heart – So many thanks to you and congratulations on such a good piece of ploughing" (*Mikimoto* L46, p. 159).

He was still enjoying it in November: "Your book is enough to make one wish oneself a girl, – and never to have seen a needle – and to be just getting one's first lesson" (*Mikimoto* L47, p. 161). He has been reading it, learning from it, and imagining himself as a girl-reader in light of it.

[4] Illth is a Ruskinism, meaning being ill rather than well in economic, social and aesthetic senses. It is the opposite of "wealth," as in his famous declaration that "There is no wealth but life." See *Unto this Last* (17.89, 105) and *Munera Pulveris* (17.168).

Stanley's dedication ascribes these words to Ruskin: "While the plough of the husbandman goes well in the field, and the plough (needle [she adds in brackets]) of the woman goes well at home, the nation will be happy" (vii). He never quite wrote this. In their succinctness, they are closer to words from Tennyson's *The Princess* (1847; 1850): "Man for the field and woman for the hearth; Man for the sword and for the needle she" (5.437-8). The link is pertinent: *The Princess* addresses women's place in society. As Rosemary Mitchell points out, this speech

> expresses the ideology of the separate spheres, which allocated to each sex a social *locus* and task. Needlework, as a symbolic representation of woman in her legitimate, domestic sphere was a frequent motif of nineteenth-century perceptions of womanhood, in addition to playing a significant part in the lives of nineteenth century women. (185)

It is part and parcel of the ideology Garrett fought against and Ruskin, despite a deeply-held essentialist perspective on gender, blurred in his own (inter-)actions in relation to women and the feminine, with needlework offering a specific example of this.

Stanley's dedication paraphrases Ruskin's "The Work of Iron, in Nature, Art, and Policy," an 1858 lecture published in *The Two Paths* (1859). This is not the only time Stanley reworked Ruskin. Like Garrett summarising Bastiat and Mill, in her *Ruskin's Thoughts About Women, collected from his more modern works and arranged by Kate Stanley*, she similarly rewords Ruskin. As Christina Rieger has noted,

> she alternated between quoting Ruskin outright (with quotation marks), paraphrasing him, and quoting him exactly, but without quotation marks […] it is sometimes difficult for the reader to tell where John Ruskin ends and Kate Stanley begins. (239)[5]

Stanley, like Ruskin, blurs expected gender roles; here, taking onto herself the authority to judge what to extract from renowned Ruskin, and how to (re-)present it. It is also notable that this 16-page pamphlet is the transcript of a lecture she gave to the mixed-gender Ruskin Society.

[5] For a different yet pertinent type of editing done by Stanley – the drawing together of best examples of students' needlework into an album – see Vivienne Richmond's catalogue to *A Remedy for Rents*.

In distilling Ruskin's thoughts on women, she allocates just one paragraph of the pamphlet to needlework, summarising Ruskin without quotation marks:

> All young women-kind should learn to sew plain work and samplers with beautiful designs wrought in silk and golden thread and such an amount of dress-making as shall enable them to comply with their natural instinct for self-decoration in all worthy and graceful ways, repressing in the rich their ostentation and encouraging in the poor their wholesome pride. (14-15)

Like Ruskin in *Fors* 95, she moves from needlework to education more broadly and states that, for Ruskin,

> […] girls' education should be as serious as boys'. They should have the same advantage as their brothers, appeal should be made to the same grand instincts of virtue in them, they should be taught that courage and truth are the pillars of their being […]. (16)

The link between labour, education, courage and the plough/needle is one Ruskin makes overt in "The Work of Iron." He first outlines how the titular element is useful then builds to "iron in policy" as embodied by "three great instruments by which its political action may be simply typified; namely, the Plough, the Fetter, and the Sword," each politically and practically useful as forms shaped "to pierce, to bind, and to smite" (16.395). He adds that "On our understanding the right use of these three instruments depend […] all our power as a nation, and all our happiness as individuals," for they represent "Labour, Law, and Courage" (16.395, 408).

He starts with labour and deals simultaneously with the culturally-agreed synecdochically-gendered piercing tools: plough and needle.

> THE PLOUGH. I say, first, on our understanding the right use of the plough, with which, in justice to the fairest of our labourers, we must always associate that feminine plough – the needle. The first requirement for the happiness of a nation is that it should understand the function in this world of these two great instruments: a happy nation may be defined as one in which the husband's hand is on the plough, and the housewife's on the needle; so in due time reaping its golden harvest, and shining in golden vesture: and an unhappy nation is one which, acknowledging no use of plough nor needle, will assuredly at last find its

> storehouse empty in the famine, and its breast naked to the cold. (16.395-96)

While the feminine is idealised ("the fairest of our labourers," with fair meaning just-judging and beautiful), both male and female are given equal responsibility in pursuing "the happiness of a nation." Britain remains his primary readership, but he is not thinking in such small terms. He applies this concept internationally by referring to "a nation" (not "our") and further declares "the greater part of the suffering and crime which exist at this moment in civilized Europe" stems from individuals attempting "to feed where they have not furrowed, and be warm where they have not woven" (16.396). There is an ironic turn in his use of "civilized" here: dishonest and unfair distribution of wealth and labour belie Europe's claim to superiority. Using needle/plough, he questions and blurs accepted hierarchies.

Stanley's dedication and Ruskin's original text foreground gendered distinctives while addressing national needs. Writing a year after Stanley's book, in *Fors* 94 and 95, Ruskin problematizes this division of needle/plough. He directs his readers: "For plain work, get Miss Stanley's book," then flows from declaring girls should "sew a proper sampler" entailing "any motto they like in illuminated letters, finished with gold thread" through a discussion of "women's work" beyond the needle, to childcare, cooking and cleaning within domestic interiors, to the exterior, arguing "that the essentially right life for all woman-kind is that of the Swiss Paysanne" (29.491). Needle and plough coalesce; she is not just doing interior work of the "needle," but also exterior: "the farm work, or the garden, or the dairy" (29.491). Ruskin reinforces this point with a British literary example: Walter Scott's portrayal of "such life in old Scotland," where "a company of women, actively engaged in loading a cart with manure" includes "the laird's own lady, and two or three of her daughters [who…] seemed quite unconscious of having been detected in an occupation unsuitable to their rank" (29.491-92). Offering this as the ideal of females working in community through manual labour outdoors, Ruskin simultaneously breaks down boundaries of gender and class. It is not a stable-boy shovelling manure, but "the laird's own lady."

3. Ruskin's lessons for the nations: "this vision of thread and needlework"

The introduction to this paper noted that, in *Fors* 94 and 95, Ruskin devised a universal curriculum:

> certain elements of education […] necessary to the inhabitants of every spot of

> earth. Cleanliness, obedience, the first laws of music, mechanics, and geometry, the primary facts of geography and astronomy, and the outlines of history, should evidently be taught alike to poor and rich, to sailor and shepherd to labourer and shopboy (29.495-6).

He outlines multidisciplinary subjects, bridging arts, humanities and sciences. His curricular examples, flowing from a classroom of primary-aged students through to a teaching museum for the continuing education of adult workers, culminate in needlework, the "acicular art of nations" (29.509). As he discusses "this vision of thread and needlework," his use of needlework carries an awareness of its importance as a historical product with nationally-specific-yet-universal aspects (29.511). Uniquely of the subjects in his curriculum, he frames needlework in the context of a museum, and from this weaves his wider teachings.
The section begins:

> And lastly of needlework. I find among the materials of *Fors*, thrown together long since, but never used, the following sketch of what the room of the Sheffield Museum, set apart for its illustration, was meant to contain. (29.509)

While this plan for the museum – with needlework foregrounded – never quite came into being, the museum did. The fact that Ruskin even contemplated including a needlework room is significant: Ruskin's "Sheffield Museum" was set up and stocked by him for the workers of Sheffield, especially male metalworkers. It was designed to provide free access to aesthetic models, helping them to understand beauty. Ruskin believed this would improve the quality of their lives and the objects they made. A link between male-created objects and textiles appeared much earlier in Ruskin. Anuradha Chatterjee traces the subtle pattern woven into some of his earliest writing on art and architecture, noting how Ruskin looked to nature for inspiration, filtered this through textiles, then considered architecture through this lens:

> Nature was transformed into composition of woven and matted elements. The field of green grass was like a carpet, flowers were the embroidery on this carpet, and the interlaced branches of the trees were the canopy. The divine creation of earth as a habitable space for human beings was possible because of the creation of dressed natural forms. As the act of creating was synonymous with dressing, masons and builders mimicked the divine work in architecture. They created textile and fabric analogies in stone. (39)

The importance of textiles for Ruskin's vision of education and social improvement can be seen in the fact that his ideal vision of a museum for workmen included a room dedicated to:

> All the acicular art of nations – savage and civilized – from Lapland boot, letting in no snow or water, to Turkey cushion bossed with pearl, – to valance of Venice gold in needlework, – to the counterpanes and samplers of our own lovely ancestresses. (29.509)

As he lists items, some purely decorative ("valance of Venice gold"), others more practical ("Lapland boot, letting in no snow or water"), the interwoven, distinctive-yet-supportive, aspects of national identity (including textiles) are stressed. Ruskin believed Sheffield's workers and the readers of *Fors* should learn from all these. This interdependent list of needle-products and the drive to embark on layered learning in light of them is echoed in Ruskin's approaches to academic disciplines. Having outlined subjects from arithmetic to zoology, when he begins his account of needlework, his interests in intertwined disciplines is foregrounded. Significantly, rather than "needle art," he uses "acicular art." "[A]cicular," meaning needle-shaped, is a term used in scientific classification of botany and geology when naming things as being like a needle. It is not used in discussing actual needle and thread. Yet here he does so when approaching skilled needlework. And, while the intended observer-student is a male metal-worker, the teaching flows from "our lovely ancestresses." Like Garrett's and Stanley's manuals, these craftswomen implicitly have the authority and skill to teach the men.

He further contextualises what should be displayed "in our first Museum room" (29.510). The room honoured by being "first," setting the tone for all to come,

> [i]llustrat[es] the true nature of a thread and a needle, the structure first of wool and cotton, of fur and hair and down, hemp, flax, and silk: – microscope permissible, *here*, if anything can be shown of *why* wool is soft, and fur fine, and cotton downy, and down downier; and how a flax fibre differs from a dandelion stalk, and how the substance of a mulberry leaf can become velvet for Queen Victoria's crown, and clothing of purple for the housewife of Solomon. (29.510)

In a typically Ruskinian manoeuvre, he begins by focusing on what is innate within what naturally occurs in order to teach broader social and ethical issues. Although looking

backwards and turning to laborious, traditional modes of textile production, he allows for modern scientific enquiry insofar as it can educate: "microscope permissible *here*" to understand softness (29.510). He ends this paragraph by alluding to two embodiments of feminine virtue, wisdom and power: Queen Victoria and the "housewife" of Proverbs 31. The biblical ideal is clothed "in silk and purple," expensive fibre and dye, so is wealthy, but nevertheless actively makes: "She seeketh wool and flax, and worketh diligently with her hands" (Prov. 31.13). Ruskin's readers knew this archetypal woman and her linking of textiles with morality. This figure also influenced the preface to *Sesame and Lilies*, where Ruskin encouraged affluent readers to provide clothing for the poor, suggesting they commission, and if necessary train, local women to spin good fabric for such sewing, thus employing needy neighbours (18.40). These moral and aesthetic guidelines, asking well-to-do women to make clothing for and put clothing on others, were acts of feminised charity and ideal humanity, which Ruskin repeatedly applauds. But he

> not only encouraged his female readers to undertake these tasks, he actively engaged in [them…]: he clothed others and his personal letters [from the 1870s and 1880s] are peppered by references to dresses he commissioned for women in his circle. (Dickinson "Teach" 59)

Through textiles, later-Ruskin was engaging in feminised activity. As Dinah Birch demonstrates in relation to the earlier *Sesame and Lilies*, often cited as an example of Ruskin treating women as inferior, it "is primarily autobiographical. Ruskin is writing across gender, and he is writing of himself [… in] cross-gender movements of thought" (312, 314). Birch notes in relation to "sewing, or weaving" as a "controlling metaphor in Ruskin's writing" in the mid-1860s:

> This is not a matter of the superficial embellishment of embroidery, but the kind of needlework that sews things together, making and mending the garments we all need. Ruskin interprets the act of sewing, like that of writing, as essentially one of service. It is creative, but never independent. (319)

Twenty years later, at the end of *Fors* and following instruction in needlework and embroidery from Stanley and other women, Ruskin's perception of needlework has expanded. Returning our attention to the museum and curriculum outlined there, the cultures of individual nations are evoked through needlework products, which are both practical and

embellished. In an echo of the opening to *The Stones of Venice* (1851), where two fallen ocean empires (Ancient Tyre and Renaissance Venice) form a warning to the British Empire then at its peak, he lists "Tyrian Scarlet," Venetian "valance" of gold and modern British "velvet" for Queen Victoria. He expands the tripartite, ocean-empire vision from *Stones* to include other nations: Turkey, Lapland and France (29.509). As for Britain, he extends the temporal focus back from Victorian present to "Saxon," "Norman," Early Modern "counterpanes," and more recent "samplers" made by "our […] ancestresses" (29.511, 509). Although far less celebrated within criticism, for Ruskin, national needlework and dress echo national architectures or art movements. Throughout Ruskin's oeuvre, there is a recurring theme of the strengths of particular nations – rooted in specific geographical settings – coupled with a seemingly contradictory requirement on Ruskin's part that these nations should learn from each other. This applies to all aspects of culture, including needlework.

Conclusion

Ruskin's writing emphasises developing and learning skills, looking to nature for examples, bridging and blurring boundaries such as those of nation and gender, while paradoxically simultaneously reinforcing what is distinctive. The final letter of *Fors Clavigera*, 96, contains almost nothing of Ruskin himself; at this point, he effectively fell silent. So, in many ways *Fors* 95, which culminates in a discussion of needlework, forms a climax to Ruskin's vast canon. While needlework had been seen as a lesser, feminine skill, here Ruskin foregrounds its importance to male and female. It functions as a lesson, both applied and metaphorical: the finer threads of needlework outline thoughts for a better, more peaceful and sustainable global society, whose culturally constructed "Rents" can be "remed[ied]" (29.510). This seaming together at the wider cultural and national levels is in keeping with his "integrative aim" to break down "the distinction between the artisan and the artist" through his "conviction that the fine and the applied arts should be reunited" (Waithe "Cultural" 265). In doing so, he raises needlework from feminine craft to human art.

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